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Petrarch, the First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters. A Selection from his Correspondence with Boccaccio and other Friends, Designed to Illustrate the Beginnings of the Renaissance. By JAMES HARVEY ROBINSON, with the collaboration of HENRY WINCHESTER ROLFE. Pp. x, 436. Price, \$2.00. New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1898.

The scope of this important contribution to our understanding of the significance of the Renaissance is clearly indicated in its title. In his introduction, which has literary charm as well as historical interest, Professor Robinson characterizes the position of Petrarch with reference to the mediæval and modern epochs as that of the chief figure in the period of transition. The relative merits of his prose and poetry are discussed and some striking facts in regard to the appreciation they have enjoyed, respectively, since the time of their production, are given. The conclusions of de Nolhac as the result of his attempt to trace Petrarch's library to its final disposition are related, and Petrarch's connection with the philosophy and educational methods of the schools is set forth.

The first chapter of the book itself is biographical, and opens with Petrarch's own narrative of the events of his life in the "Letter to Posterity." In Chapter II, Professor Robinson has permitted the letters themselves, in graceful and effective translation, to tell the story of Petrarch's relations with his literary contemporaries. In Chapter III, Professor Rolfe has advanced in a dozen pages the thesis that Petrarch, more than any other man, was responsible for the Renaissance, and has fortified his assertion with fifty pages of *pièces justificatives* from the Letters. Professor Rolfe sees, perhaps, too vividly the great mediæval and modern epochs narrowing down to a point of union, where Petrarch stands like a magician, summoning the spirit of reason from out the mists of theology. This fault, which permeates the whole philosophy of the book, must find its justification, if anywhere, in the dramatic necessities of presentation.

The other chapters by Professor Robinson deal with travels, political opinions, and the conflict of monastic and secular ideals. Here, as throughout the book, the happiest use is made of extracts from Petrarch's letters, which bring out the conditions of the time more clearly than any amount of second-hand description could do.

The book is beautifully made. It has a wholesomeness that invites perusal and ownership. The illustrations possess the merit that they are of Petrarch's own time. The portrait opposite the title page, from a manuscript in the National Library at Paris, although it lends to Petrarch a certain robustness which disqualifies

him as a member of the famous trio of dyspeptics, carries with it a sense of unquestionable resemblance, like a spirit out of the past. The single criticism which the manufacture of the book inspires touches the use of Petrarch's sketch upon the cover; this both on account of its lack of symmetry and of its poverty of meaning. A trifle thrown off by a man of genius in the direction of his ineptitude is not adapted for the symbolic characterization of his work and personality.

As a piece of scholarly work the book meets all requirements. It is withal so charming and, now that it is done, so necessary, that the reader is tempted to wonder why the task has been so long deferred. Of the three men, Petrarch, Erasmus and Voltaire, whose lives afford such interesting parallels, primarily because they were unfettered with the ideals and conventions, religious and otherwise, of their times, the first in chronological sequence has been the last to find a sympathetic expositor in the English tongue. In the case of Erasmus, peculiar circumstances, the fact of his left-handed connection with the Lutheran movement, called him forth from obscurity at a time when men of his rationalistic tendencies might otherwise have failed of recognition. Two men at least were moved to construct epistolary Lives, whose chief motive was to minimize his fault toward Luther; to erect, in other words, a defence where none was needed and to sacrifice the impregnable logic of Erasmus' position. Fate has been kinder to Voltaire in later times, trusting his memory to the hands of a biographer, who, though differing from Voltaire in point of view, has so much in common with him in the manner of his thought that his presentation weakens in no wise the significance of Voltaire's activity. It would be interesting in this connection to discover the reasons that have conspired to delay so long the rehabilitation of the eldest of this trio of spiritual free lances, whose offence against theology is of so long standing that he might well pass muster as a religionist of to-day.

That Petrarch may be presented without Laura, and that his rhetorical complaints against the corruptions of Avignon may be relegated to a comparatively insignificant space, is nothing if not a sign of better times in the intellectual world and of a disposition and an ability to make use of the more valuable, if less dramatic, materials that history affords. Petrarch presents an excellent example of the manner in which a progressive civilization seizes upon and utilizes the things which nourish its transient ideals. A sentimental period, for instance, has found in Petrarch the hopeless lover of Laura, pouring forth his sorrows in lyrical rhapsodies, when very likely Laura was never more than a song-motive or a bit of

conventionalism from the Provençal. Another, a polemical period, seeking to build up a lurid background, to justify the main facts of Protestant defection, hunting the cradles and the graves of pre-Lutheran generations in search of Reformers before the Reformation, has seized upon Petrarch's invectives against the Babylon of the West, invectives motived by patriotism or irritability, to make this man of books, the least of whose interests was theological, bear unwilling witness against a corrupt Papacy. When Petrarch has been put to such frivolous and unworthy uses, surely it is sounding the note of advance to bring him forward in all the length and breadth of his intellectual interests.

It is not as a biographer, Professor Robinson tells us at the beginning of his book, nor as a literary critic that he approaches his subject. His effort is to present Petrarch "as the mirror of his age." But is the phrase well chosen? A little further on, opposite the opening page of Chapter I, our author has set a half dozen lines from M. de Nolhac, whose work on Petrarch is elsewhere warmly commended. Here Petrarch is called "*le premier homme moderne*," a note, by the way, of biographical enthusiasm rather than of scholarship; and it is said to be "the least contestable mark of his genius" that "he escapes almost entirely the influence of his century and of his environment." Which view shall we accept? for unquestionably here lies a contradiction. Perhaps the point is not worth the taking; but what Petrarch really does mirror is not his age, in its intellectual achievement or otherwise, but the activity of a chosen coterie of spirits, who were exceptional in their generation and rather of a piece with an age to come.

It will be interesting to observe what success will attend the literary venture of Professors Robinson and Rolfe. Since the work has been so well done, its success will indicate to what extent the English reading public has come to the point of interesting itself in a treatment of the purely cultural side of the first of humanists. Already in France, M. Victor Develay has thought to discover a demand for Petrarch's Letters. The conditions that determine the sale of books are often individual and altogether elusive, but the fact that the "*Lettres à Boccace*" and the crisp little booklets of the *Librairie des Bibliophiles* are so easily to be had, with uncut pages, at half the publication prices, merely stimulates the hope that another public may prove more appreciative.

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